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ABSTRACT

The ability to estimate a student's chances of dropping out should be of value to advisors counseling entering freshman. Students who had been college freshmen in the fall of 1978 and who did not enroll for the fall of 1979 (N=111), and a random sample of students (N=509) continuing their education in the fall of 1979 completed questionnaires designed to identify personal characteristics that differentiate college persisters from dropouts. Information was obtained concerning background, college expectations, college experiences, and present situations. Results indicate that the college persister is a little older upon matriculation, tends to come from an urban or suburban setting, has a definite career or academic field of interest, considers college graduation extremely important, estimates his grade-point average to be above average, and tends to be employed. Only 56% of the persisters, compared to 69% of the dropouts, indicated that the university they were attending was their first choice college. A high percentage of all respondents stated they would recommend the school to a friend. Institutions can use information about their dropouts to formulate policies for change. (Author/NRB)

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PREDICTING WHICH FRESHMEN WILL DROP OUT - A MEASURE OF COLLEGE PERSISTENCE

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1980

This study examines the differing personal characteristics of the college persister as compared with those freshmen dropping out of college. Findings suggest a number of personal characteristics that differantiate those students electing to continue their education from those dropping out of college.

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During the Fall of 1979, institutions of higher education in the United States experienced the largest freshman class since 1975. This represented nearly a 5 percent increase over the previous year.

The 2.5 million new students who showed up on campuses came, for the most part, from the largest group of 18-year-olds that the country has ever had - and larger than it will have in any year in the rest of this century, according to Census Bureau projections.

From a peak of 4,292,000 in 1979, the 18-year-old age group will hit a low of 3,168,000 in 1992 - a decline of 26 percent.

For the broader, 18-to-24 population group, the decline is not expected to begin until 1982 (Magarrell, 1980).

Evidence from a number of national retention studies suggest that from 35 to 40 percent of these entering freshmen in baccalaureate-granting institutions will never graduate. Further investigation finds that approximately half of those drop-outs occur in the freshman year (Astin, 1978; Cope and Hannah, 1975; Pitcher and Blaushild, 1970).

The enrollment level of any college or university is affected directly by its retention rate. Reducing the number of freshmen who drop out for the "wrong" reasons may be the quickest and most appropriate way to insure a continuance of student enrollment. Hopefully, enrollment maintenance will not be the goal of an institution but a by-product of an improved climate for learning. Increased retention will result if programs and services are improved.

Previous studies suggest that a number of student background characteristics may be useful in predicting which students will leave college prior to the completion of their degree (Astin, 1972; Astin, 1978; Cope and Hannah, 1975; Pitcher and Blaushild, 1970.) The ability to estimate, on the basis of these indicators, any given student's chances of dropping out should be of value to those advisors counseling the beginning college student.

Also, within each college or university the administration needs such information to obtain relatively unbiased estimates of the probable impact of policy alternatives. The student background characteristics can be used to assess the impact of alternative environments and decisions.

This study was designed to survey both former students and those students electing to continue their education. Specifically, the study attempted to identify which personal characteristics differentiate between these two groups. The findings were used to review those institutional policies that may have a detrimental effect upon the student's retention.

METHOD

The questionnaire and cover letter explaining the purpose of the study were mailed to those freshmen students enrolled in the Fall of 1978 but not returning in the Fall of 1979. Students dismissed for low scholarship were not included in the study. Follow-up postcards were mailed to nonrespondent former students

three weeks after the questionnaires were mailed. In addition, efforts were made to reach as many student nonrespondents as possible by telephone to encourage them to return their questionnaires.

A second questionnaire and cover letter were mailed to a sample of students continuing their education in the Fall of 1979. Follow-up postcards were also sent to these students if they failed to return the questionnaire within three weeks. Nonrespondents also received a telephone call if they did not respond to the postcard.

SUBJECTS

The sample consisted of the following groups:

Group I. Those freshmen in the Fall of 1978 that did not enroll for the Fall of 1979. Students dismissed for low scholarship were not included in the study. (n=162);

Group II. A random sample (n=800) of Eastern Illinois University students registered for the Fall of 1979, (total population = 9166).

QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaires were adapted from a composite of questionnaires found in the text by Cope and Hannah (1975). The revised questionnaires consisted of three parts. The first section on both questionnaires asked for such background information as the description of the

students' home town, age upon matriculation, grade point average in high school, and whether the parents were sympathetic with their educational plans. The second section determined the students' expectations about college. Responses indicated the students' career goal or academic field of interest upon matriculation, whether Eastern was their first choice of a college to attend, and their reasons for selecting Eastern Illinois University. The third section dealt with the students' college experiences. A determination was made as to whether they worked while attending college, the college grade point average, and their primary concerns during their last/past semester. The possible topics included academic, social, financial or personal. The fourth section was included to determine their present situation. The continuing students were asked if they intended to transfer prior to graduation. In contrast, the questionnaire sent to the drop-outs asked if they were attending another college or university. On both questionnaires the students were asked if they would recommend Eastern Illinois University to a friend.

RESULTS

Returned questionnaires were received from 69 percent of the non-returning freshmen (n=111), and 64 percent of the continuing students (n=509).

Table I presents the response percentages to each of the four categories found in the questionnaires. Several differences were

found between those students continuing their education and those students that had discontinued their education. This supports the published results of similar studies.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The drop-out tended to be a student from a small town or rural area with 56 percent of these students reporting this background In contrast, 52 percent of the persisters came from either urban or suburban backgrounds.

In reporting the age when the student first enrolled in college, it was found that 97 percent of the drop-outs were between the ages of 17 to 19. However, only 80 percent of the persisters first enrolled when they were between the ages of 17 to 19.

No difference was found when asked if the students' parents were encouraging or sympathetic with their children's educational plans. It was found that 93 percent of the parents of both persisters and drop-outs were either very sympathetic or fairly sympathetic.

Very little difference was found when asked about the student's average grades in high school. A total of 78 percent of the persisters reported a high school grade average of B or better Whereas, 79 percent of the drop-outs reported their grade average was B or better.

A series of eight questions was included for the students to rate themselves on a set of either personality or academic traits. The students were asked to compare themselves with other students

during their freshmen year of college. For the most part very little difference was found between the two groups.

INITIAL EXPECTATIONS

It was interesting to note that only 56 percent of the persisters reported that Eastern was their first choice of a college to attend. In contrast, 69 percent of the drop-outs indicated Eastern was selected as their first choice.

The persisters were more likely to have decided on a career or academic field of interest prior to enrollemnt than were the drop-outs. Seventy-five percent of the persisters had either a career or academic field of interest decided upon prior to enrollment, compared to 70 percent of the drop-outs.

Another series of ten questions dealt with the students' feeling prior to enrollment. As expected, 69 percent of the persisters as compared with only 56 percent of the drop outs indicated they were determined to graduate from college. Only two other questions in this series indicated much of a difference between the two groups. The first had 67 percent of the persisters and only 59 percent of the drop-outs indicating that they chose Eastern because of the excellent academic reputation. The second area where some variance occured was when the two groups were asked if the comparatively low cost of attending college had made a difference in their selection of Eastern. It was found that 65 percent of the persisters

disclosed that, indeed, cost did make a difference. Only 55 percent of the drop-outs considered cost when selecting Eastern.

COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS

Forty percent of the persisters worked at a part-time job while attending Eastern. This compares with only 32 percent of the drop-outs.

When asked how many semester hours the students attempted either this past semester or their last semester prior to dropping out, very little difference was found. Eighty-five percent of the persisters as compared with 86 percent of the drop-outs were carrying a full complement of courses. At Eastern Illinois University, 13 to 18 semester hours constitutes a full load.

A question concerning reaction to social life on the campus did not differentiate persisters from drop-outs. Neither group considered it very important. Very little difference existed between the groups concerning home community. Seventy-one percent of the persisters as compared to seventy-three percent of the drop-outs expressed no concern.

When asked about any financial concerns, 21 percent of the persisters indicated financial aid was not sufficient. However, only 6 percent of the drop-outs stated they decided not to return to Eastern because financial aid was not sufficient.

It was not surprising to find that 67 percent of the persisters

and only 50 percent of the drop-outs rated their academic performance the past/last semester to be above average. For this study a grade of A or B was considered above average. In contrast, 18 percent of the drop-outs were either on academic probation or had accumulated a majority of D grades. Only 4 percent of the persisters had below a C average.

Another finding supported earlier research findings in that only 1 percent of the persisters thought it was not very important to graduate from college sometime in the future. Seventeen percent of the drop-outs thought it was not very important to obtain a college degree.

A review of the drop-out responses found that 64 percent of Eastern's former students were attending another college. This compares to 16 percent of the persisters indicating they planned to transfer prior to completing a degree at Eastern. Another 32 percent were working, 5 percent were homemakers, 1 percent was unemployed, 2 percent were in the military and 5 percent failed to respond to this question.

All of the current and former students were asked if they would recommend Eastern to a friend. While 88 percent of the persisters stated they would make this recommendation, only 77 percent of the drop-outs indicated they would make the recommendation.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results indicated a number of pronounced differences in the

personal characteristics of the college persister as compared with those freshmen dropping out of college. From the findings of this study the university administration has developed some insight as to the profile of the college persister. Generally speaking, the persister is a little older upon matriculation (seventeen percent were 20 years or older), tends to come from either an urban or suburban setting (52 percent), had a definite career or academic field of interest (75 percent), had indicated that graduation from college sometime in the future to be extremely important (79 percent), estimated their grade point average to be above average (67 percent), and tended to be employed more often (40 percent) than the drop-out (32 percent). It was interesting to note that only 56 percent of the persisters compared to 69 percent of the drop-outs had indicated that Eastern was their first choice of a college to attend. Twenty-one percent of the persisters had indicated that they thought financial aid was not sufficient. However, only 6 percent of the drop-outs reported leaving Eastern due to the fact that financial aid was not sufficient. Finally, 88 percent of the persisters and 77 percent of the drop-outs stated they would recommend Eastern Illinois University to a friend.

The findings from this research are generally consistent with previous retention studies (Astin, 1972; Astin, 1978; Cope and Hannah, 1975; Noel, 1978; Pitcher and Blaushild, 1970) and would seem to accent that Eastern's students are not unlike other college

freshmen from public four-year universities.

Although numerous studies have been completed to assess the reasons students leave college prior to graduation, it would benefit all college administrators to know the characteristics of their own college drop-outs. By completing institutional research in this area the findings can be used to influence university policy.

The results of this research influenced Eastern's retention policy and illustrates the importance of being able to assess the student's initial likelihood of dropping out. In evaluating the impact of whether beginning students had a career goal or an academic field of interest when they enrolled, a crude approach was to compare the dropout rates of students who did and did not have a career goal upon matriculation. It was established that those with a career goal were less likely to drop out. This information is now being used to initiate a more intensive effort in providing career counseling at the freshmen level.

To assume that all studies of this type will generate the same information is false. For example, Astin (1976), had concluded that dropping out is associated with being older than most freshmen. However, Eastern's research indicated that 97 percent of the drop-outs were in the 17 to 19 age group upon matriculation.

Whatever any single institution discovers concerning the characteristics of their drop-outs, there will be no worthwhile purpose served unless these results serve as a catalyst for change.

College student retention is a campus-wide responsibility. It starts with an attitude that suggests the institution exists to serve students. This attitude should permeate the entire university system - from the governing board to the maids in the residence halls. Everyone on campus - faculty, administrators and support staff - has an important contribution to make as a potent retention agent.

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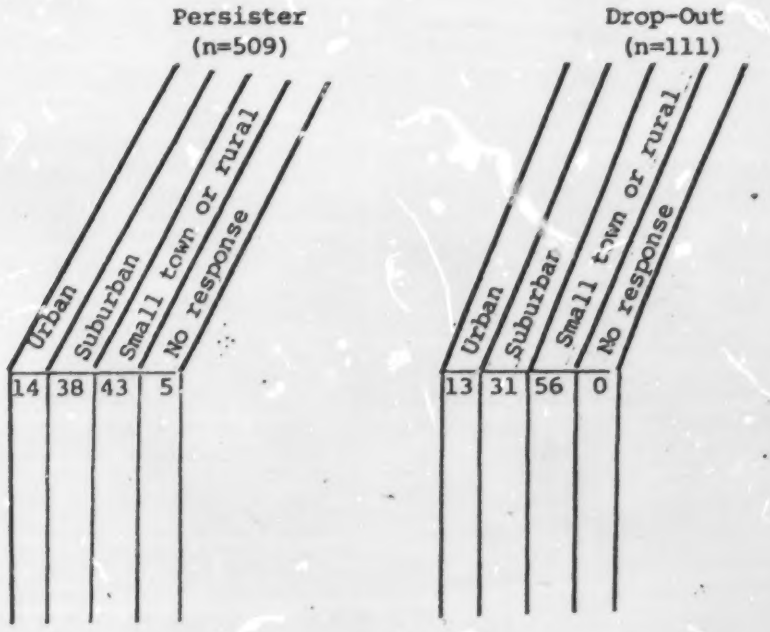
TABLE I

Differing Personal Characteristics of the College Persister as Compared with the Drop-out (Percentages)

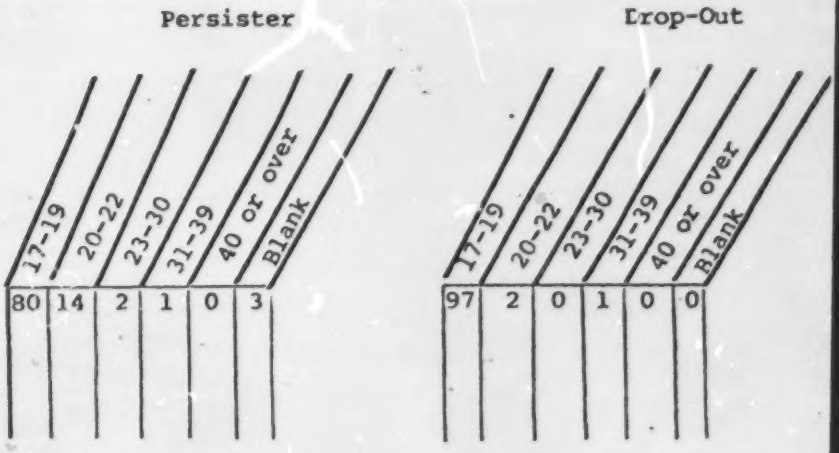
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Question

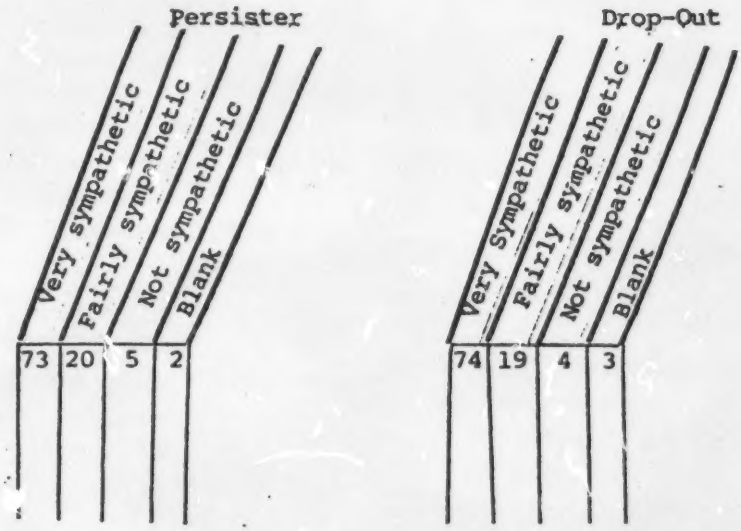
1. Which best describes the location of your home during your high school years?



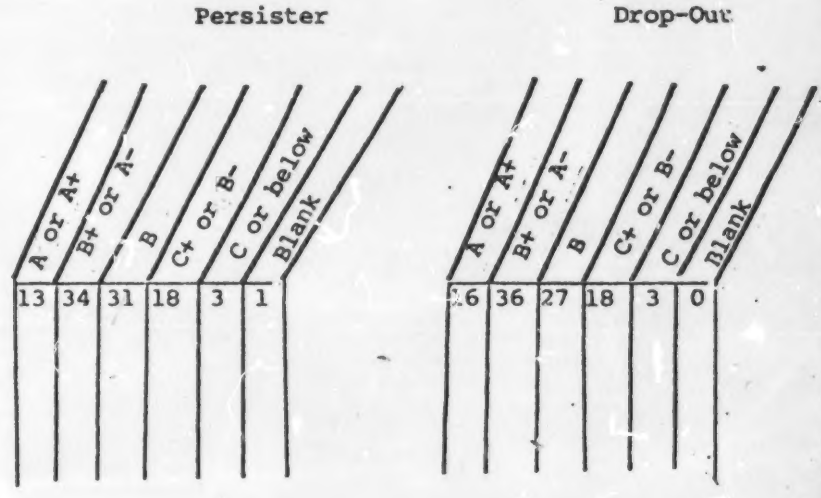
2. At what age did you enter Eastern?



3. Were your parents encouraging, sympathetic with your educational plans?



4. What was your average grade in high school?

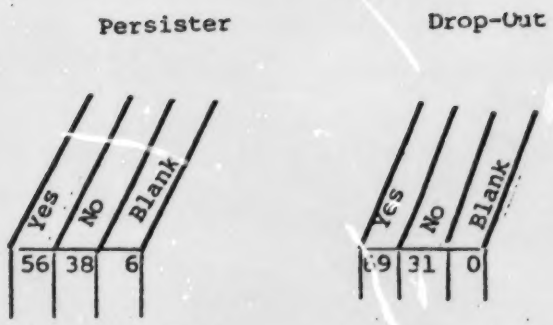


Rate yourself on each of the following traits as you really think you were when compared with the average freshman at Eastern.

	Persister						Drop-Out					
	Highest 10 Percent	Above Average	Average	Below Average	Lowest 10 Percent	Blank	Highest 10 Percent	Above Average	Average	Below Average	Lowest 10 Percent	Blank
5. Drive to achieve	17	47	28	2	1	5	12	34	50	4	0	0
6. Popularity	3	28	56	8	1	4	2	23	55	16	4	0
7. Self-confidence (intellectual)	9	43	41	4	1	2	14	33	42	10	1	0
8. Self-confidence (social)	9	35	45	8	1	2	5	37	42	15	1	0
9. Mathematical Ability	7	30	36	18	4	5	11	26	36	22	5	0
10. Writing Ability	7	32	45	12	1	3	8	29	43	17	3	0
11. Reading Ability	10	40	42	6	1	1	14	35	41	9	1	0
12. Science Ability	6	26	47	17	2	2	8	14	57	20	1	0

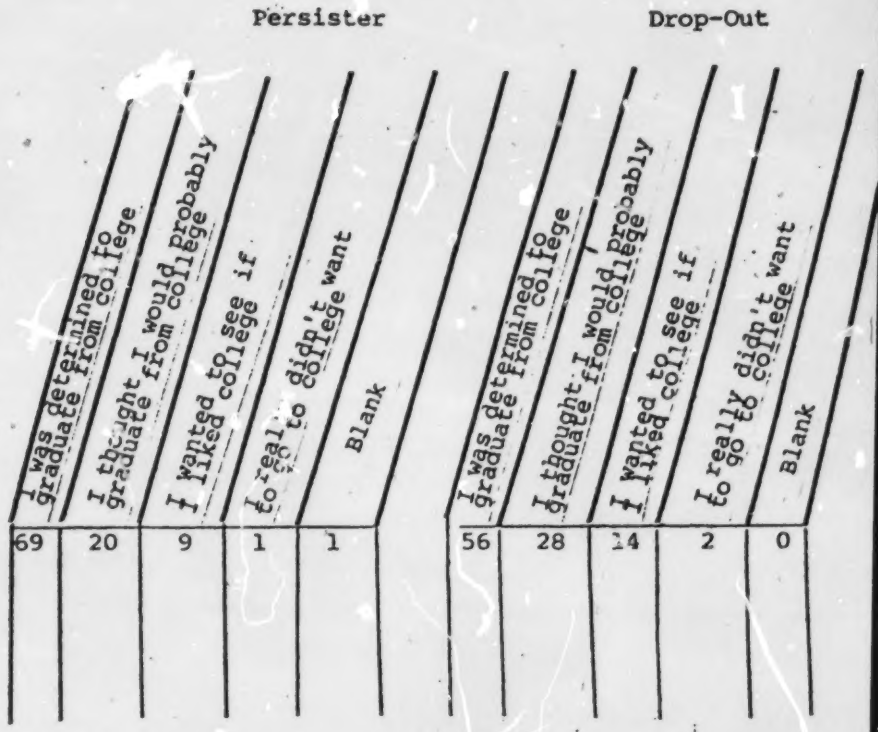
INITIAL EXPECTATIONS

13. Was Eastern Illinois University your first choice of a college to attend?



14. Did you have a career goal or an academic field of interest when you enrolled?

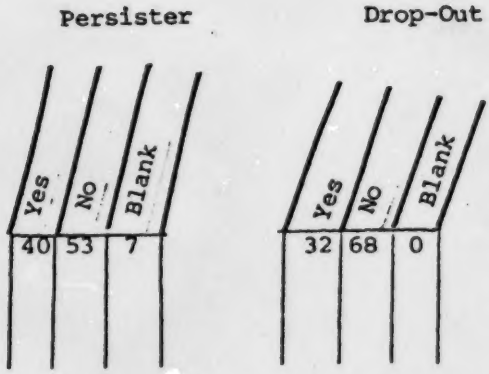
15. Which one of the following best describes your feelings before entering Eastern?



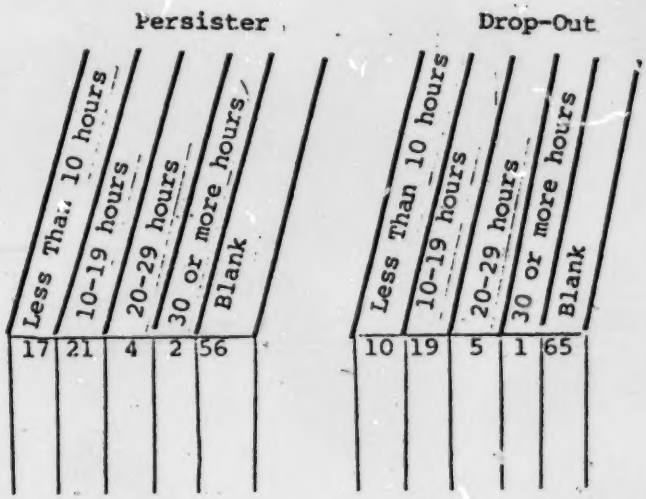
Determine your feelings about the following statements	Persister						Drop-Out					
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Does Not Apply	Blank	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Does Not Apply	Blank
16. I chose Eastern because it had an excellent academic reputation.	6	61	17	1	14	1	9	50	21	1	18	1
17. I chose Eastern because it was close to home.	12	33	27	12	11	5	14	32	29	14	10	1
18. I chose Eastern because I couldn't go to the college of my first choice.	4	10	30	25	30	1	2	8	39	22	28	1
19. I chose Eastern because of the comparatively low cost.	15	50	17	4	12	2	7	48	23	10	11	1
20. I chose Eastern because of the influence or wishes of my family.	6	19	34	16	24	1	1	21	28	22	27	1
21. I chose Eastern because of the suggestion of a high school teacher or guidance counselor.	3	16	32	16	28	5	2	21	33	17	26	1
22. I chose Eastern because my friends were attending.	5	22	31	20	20	2	5	25	30	14	25	1
23. I chose Eastern because of the expected terrific social activities.	1	17	42	20	19	1	0	15	37	20	27	1
24. I chose Eastern because of the good athletic program.	4	15	35	18	27	1	6	14	27	14	39	0

COLLEGE EXPERIENCES

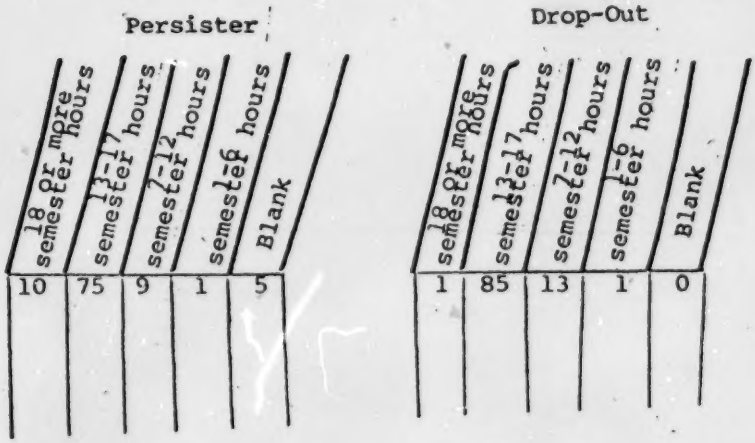
25. Do(Did) you work at a part-time job while attending college? (Answered question #26 if response was Yes)



26. How many hours per week do (did) you work?

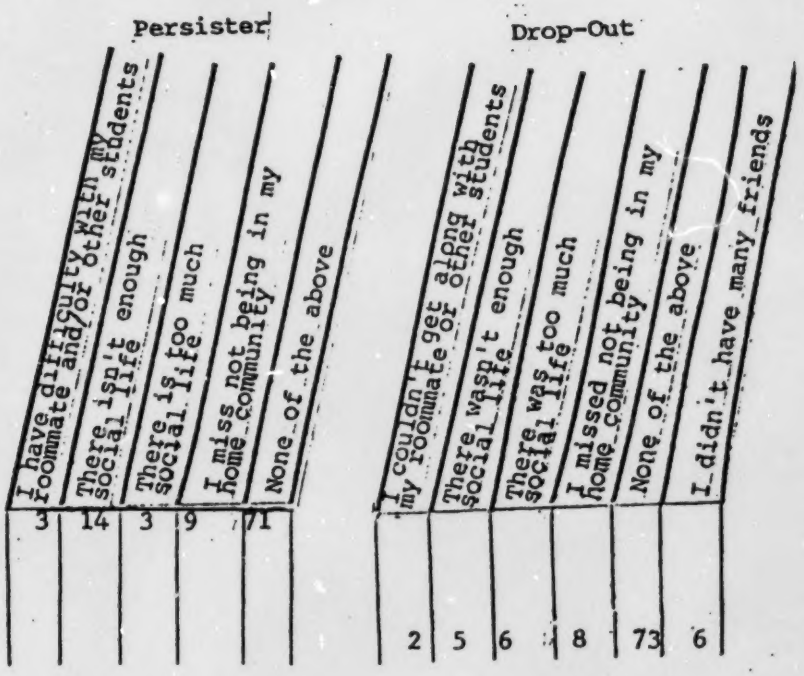


27. How many hours did you carry this last (past) semester at Eastern?



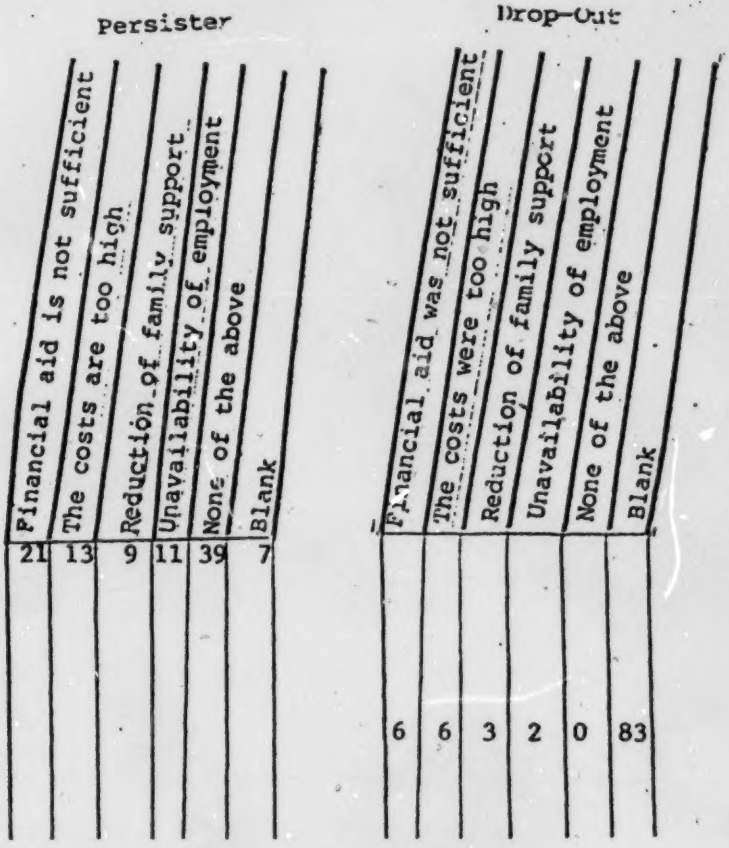
28. If appropriate, please indicate your primary social concern.

If you decided not to return to Eastern due to social concerns, please indicate your primary or most important problem. (answer only if the primary reason)



29. If you have financial concerns, please indicate your primary or most important problem. (persister)

If you decided not to return to Eastern due to financial concerns, please indicate your primary or most important problem.



30. I am beginning to doubt the value of a college degree. (persister) — 9%

I doubted the value of obtaining a college degree. (drop-out) — 13%

31. How would you rate your academic performance this past semester? (persister)

What was your academic performance when you decided to leave Eastern? (drop-out)

	(mostly A's)	Above average (mostly B's)	Average (mostly C's)	Marginal (mostly D's)	Deficient (on probation)	Blank
Persister	21	46	26	1	3	3
Drop-Out	14	36	32	5	13	0

32. How important is it to you to graduate from college sometime in the future?

	Extremely important	Fairly important	Not very important	Blank
Persister	79	19	1	1
Drop-Out	61	16	17	6

33. Do you plan to transfer to another college or university prior to completing a degree at Eastern? (persister)

Yes 16% No 82% Blank 2%

What are you doing at the present time? (drop-out)

Attending another college	64%
Working	23%
Unemployed	1%
Housemaker	5%
Military	2%
Blank	5%

34. Would you recommend Eastern Illinois University to a friend?

Persistor	
Yes	88%
No	3%
Blank	9%

Drop-Out	
Yes	77%
No	13%
Blank	10%